

HANG ON TO YOUR EGO

Their first album was hailed as 'the best debut ever'. Then came the rumours, bizarre antics and breakdowns. As The Vines get ready for a triumphant return, singer Craig Nicholls reveals how they made it back from the brink



Four pm on a typically grey, typically London Friday afternoon in February. The Trafalgar Square Hilton is abuzz with the polite chatter of the moneyed, slowly winding down for the weekend. The walls of the lobby are dominated by blown-up live photographs of the Rolling Stones, peering imperiously, if somewhat incongruously, over the clientele. Anonymous lounge music plays at the bar: Craig Nicholls, lead singer with The Vines, shuffles into the room, looking even more out of place than Mick and Keith: taller than you expect, as shambolic as you imagined, dressed in a T-shirt and duffle coat, his hair artfully distressed. Bang on cue, the CD at the bar starts to skip, tapping out a staccato rhythm. At once, Nicholls is transformed into a robotic dervish, windmilling his arms about his head like Leigh Bowery on a particularly rowdy night out. The Friday afternoon businessmen stare silently. The woman at the bar beams at the impromptu performance. "Like this one?" she asks. "Yeah!" Nicholls screams, before stopping as abruptly as he started, turning apologetically and shaking hands. Mad Craig has entered the building.

So far, so according to stereotype. When The Vines appeared on the musical radar in 2002, it was in a flower-burst of lurid press hype. A string of unhinged, incendiary live performances first caught the media's attention. Then the NME, with typical restraint, heralded the band's first album, 'Highly Evolved', as possibly the greatest debut ever: Barely drawing breath, they went on to suggest it could also be their last, given the self-destructive path their lead singer seemed to be pursuing. The zenith/nadir of this trajectory was a live appearance on 'The Late Show With David Letterman', in which the curtain fell on a turbo-charged Nicholls tumbling head-first over the drum kit while the bemused host made sardonic remarks about 'kids today'. Amid the identikit blazer-and-jeans, retro-with-a-disco-twist bands that emerged in the wake of 'Is This It', The Vines were a burst of pure, barely bridled energy. Their reference points were immaculate: Nirvana's irresistible urgency topped with harmonies to do The Beatles proud. To top it all, they had a frontman who'd apparently chanced upon all the charisma his peers had left behind.

Rumours soon began to circulate about Nicholls' erratic behaviour, about breakdowns and falling-outs within the band. It was even suggested to Nicholls that he ought to be put on suicide watch, a view with which – in print at least – he seemed to concur: Music journalists couldn't believe their luck. They'd stumbled across their very own fully-formed Kurt Cobain for the post-Strokes generation.

But, frustratingly, Nicholls wouldn't play ball. Not only has he plainly refused to die, he's gone and recorded a follow-up album, 'Winning Days', that puts 'Highly Evolved' to shame. Its first single, 'Ride', is doing so well on US radio playlists that, not only do the UK music press have some difficult egg-on-face moments ahead as they try and out-do their own hyperbole, they may even have to face up to the unthinkable: their opinions aren't going to count for much. The Vines have bigger fish to fry. Crucial to their success has always been the fact that, while their peers were scrabbling to get to the top of the indie heap on the traditional New York/Camden trail, The Vines went straight for the A-list. One minute they were recording four-track demos in their Sydney bedrooms, the next they were signed to Capitol in the US, doing studio sessions in LA with Rob Schnapf, producer for Beck, Guided By Voices, Elliot Smith and the Foo Fighters. When their original drummer, David Oliffe, quit and headed back to Sydney, the band's first choice as replacement was Ringo Starr: Like it or not, The Vines are Big Time.

But try telling Craig Nicholls that. In his head, he's still the Sydney kid on his beloved skateboard, unable to equate his own success with the often modest achievements of his idols. While most critics pick up on the classic '80s influences in the Vines' sound, his own reference points tend to rest squarely in the '90s: Suede, Swervedriver, Blur, Radiohead, The Verve... even Muse. Ask him about that: 'best debut

album ever' quote and he demurs, "I'll just be very shallow and say it's a compliment," before visibly perking up: "I think the first Supergrass album was probably the best debut album. That is amazing to me." Clearly, there's a few perspective issues to be resolved in the sudden success story of The Vines.

So is being a rock star what you imagined it would be?

Well, I think that's a dirty word, because it's all connected with drug taking and early death, so I like to be as pretentious as to call myself an artist. I guess it depends what rock'n'roll means to you. For me, rock'n'roll is on CDs; it's not about how late you stayed up and what you did the night before. But things have never really changed. Like going to award shows, I'm not into any of that. We rode in a limousine one time in LA and I thought it sucked. You go sideways and... moving in cars in general of whatever kind doesn't interest me. Cars, material things...

Aren't you sideways on a skateboard?

[laughs] Yeah. I like skateboards. I think simple things are cool - riding skateboards, watching TV, playing guitar. But definitely none of that stuff. People always ask what it's like being famous. Well, first of all I don't feel famous and secondly, if I am it's a big fucking disappointment. Even though I had no expectations for it. We wanted to turn people on to the band because we were so turned on by it; that was the only reason. It wasn't all just a vehicle... odd choice of words... to get to some certain point. I'm just not like that. I went to this award show last night, I drank a glass of water and got home before midnight.

Do people always expect you to be crazy?

Yeah. I feel very apologetic and feel like I've let people down by not being obnoxious. So sorry, guys.

Does it feel like the press have invented a persona for you?

There's a lot of that. It don't really matter: It's my job to write songs and their job to write what they think, I guess. I hate to disappoint people, but I don't feel bad about it. I'm being dramatic when I say that because I don't really care. We like sharing music with people and if they connect then it's good, but people seem to expect me to throw a television out of the window. Fuck that, it's too heavy. And I like watching it anyway.

Do you find it frustrating, people saying you're about to crack up after meeting you for half an hour?

Yeah, it is. I think anyone would be mad if they were travelling the world and people were asking them questions like that, 'What's the deal?'

Trying to get inside your head?

Yeah. I couldn't completely describe it - I didn't even want to describe it, but people would get the wrong idea and I'd get frustrated and say, 'No it's more like this...' and then I couldn't follow through. I'd get all these other ideas and I'd forget where I was. I'd get lost.

How do you feel when your first question in an interview is: 'Should you be on suicide watch?'

People think that, and it's like, 'Sorry, yeah, I'm in a good mood and I'm not on drugs, I'm not drunk, I don't have any gossip about any other bands, I've got nothing bad to say about anyone.' Except maybe the government.

Were you prepared for all that?

I wasn't prepared at all. People were warning me. They'd say, 'Look out for the NME, man.' What are you talking about, 'look out?' They just sounded like school teachers.

It has to be said, in the defence of fellow hacks, that Craig Nicholls is undeniably a little odd. He admits it, both in his lyrics (from 'Autumn Shade II': 'I'm succeeding to speak like I'm fucking m-aa-aa-ad') and, matter-of-factly, when you mention bassist Patrick Matthews' assertion that things got "pretty touch and go" towards the end of the last tour: "Well, it felt perfectly natural to me," he says, "but then I was out of my mind. I'd gone through about three mental breakdowns." However the



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Craig Nicholls of 2004 presents himself as positive, sober and undeniably the right side of sane, if not a little lost in his own world. His accent doesn't help: a weird approximation of LA via Sydney, spoken in a voice that seems perpetually on the point of cracking, but not cracking up.

If there's one word to describe Nicholls, it's 'misunderstood.' This is how he tries to explain why he's not the hellraiser people imagine: "We went out to a little bar in New York with some friends and I don't drink, but I ended up slamming my head on the table, just absolutely screaming out. And people must have thought I was either really drunk or on crystal meth or something." His point being, he wasn't drunk. Just a little tired of having to do interviews all week. You can see how people might get the wrong end of the stick. There's more. "And then when I first got here to England, I was really excited - mostly to get off the fucking plane because my short-term memory's so bad, it felt like my whole existence had been on that plane. I got off, we were in a store, trying to get some food, and this guy next to me was like, 'Are you alright?' He was an Australian guy, I recognised the accent. And I said, 'Yeah, I'm great, I'm just really excited.' I thought he was just being nice. And when he left he said, 'Stay off the drugs.'" Craig being Craig, he chased the man down the street to explain he wasn't on drugs. I'm guessing here, but I suspect it didn't help much.

All of which brings us neatly to the Letterman Incident. "That was

Craig Nicholls (left) and bassist Patrick Matthews make themselves at home, LA, February 2004.

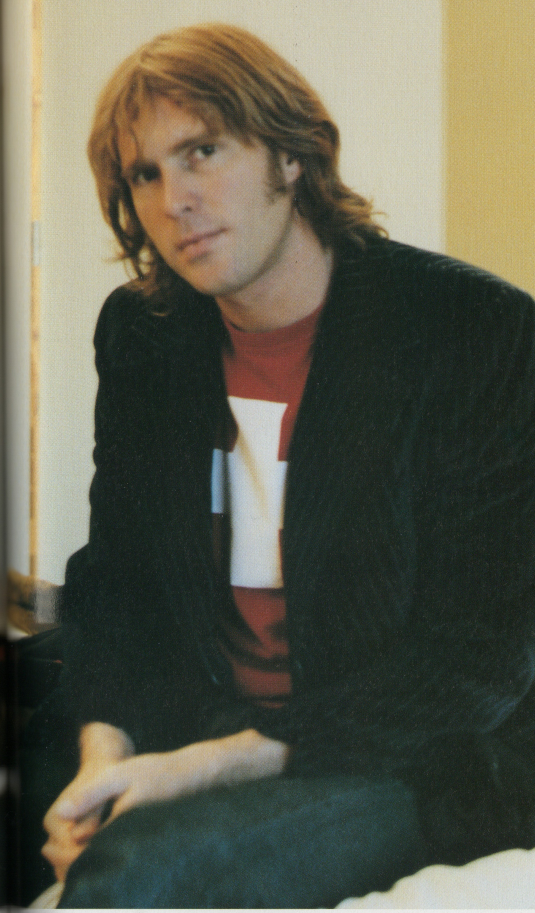




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Life on the edge: guitarist Ryan Griffiths and drummer Hamish Rosser, LA, February 2004.



crazy,” says Nicholls, with a degree of understatement. “It was great fun.” Did he get to meet Dave afterwards? “I just waved at him. I was kind of shocked myself at the whole thing, there was lights and people everywhere. I had a really good time. But it was also a weird time. I think some of the weirdness came out in the performance. People may think I’m really slow or something, but I’m really proud of that performance.” It’s also the kind of moment, like The Beatles on Ed Sullivan, or The Who in any hotel they ever stayed in, that can rubber stamp a band’s rock star credentials. “I think what it was,” says Nicholls, “was it was mental. Just because it was a knee-jerk reaction to being in such a confined studio. Plus the city: everything’s concrete, there’s a million people there and it’s all so serious. I don’t know, maybe it was a sub-conscious message to people: don’t take life too seriously. Jesus Christ.”

Fortunately, the band’s manager picked up on the ten-storey high warning signs. Together with Schnapf, again in the producer’s chair, they chose the relative calm of Bearsville recording studios in New York’s Catskill mountains, near Woodstock, to work on their next LP. Away from the concrete and the numbers, Difficult Second Album Syndrome failed to materialise, even for the follow-up to the best debut ever: “It was really good for us,” says Nicholls. “It was our producer Rob’s idea to do it there; he knew that we didn’t really like Hollywood very much. It’s in very natural surroundings and it really paid off because

I can hear it on the album, I could feel the clarity of it.”

‘Winning Days’, as the title suggests, is positive in outlook and feel. The music is more fleshed out – where once The Vines wore their Nirvana, Kinks and Beatles influences on their sleeves, now they’re more subtly incorporated into the whole. There are more moments of bucolic calm to temper the trademark brattish sneer. There are more surprises, more shifts in tempo, more moments of light and shade. In short, it’s the sound of a band maturing. “I’m really proud of this album,” says Nicholls. “People thought we were going to self-destruct, but I knew that we had the album in us – it was long overdue, like the first one was. And we were a lot more confident, because we’d done it before.”

Does Nicholls feel as if he’s calmed down? “Yeah, I guess so. And also I think you just calm down a bit anyway when you get older.” (He’s now 26.) “We wanted to not get too crazy. The first time, going into the studio for the first album, I had in my head that we were gonna have 100 tracks and everything was gonna be fucking backwards guitar, millions of different percussion at once, 20 different keyboard tracks, a million split harmonies... and then we realised that was maybe a bit ambitious. That’s what Rob taught us: less is more.” There’s even talk of a ‘concept country rock album’ next. (“It’s not gonna be punk rock sounding, it’s gonna be strings... acoustic music. Ballads.”) But despite his emphasis on restraint, both in his life and on record – despite his appeals that “you become desensitised if it’s just full-on all the time” – Craig Nicholls still can’t resist the odd primal scream. The last song on the album, following on from the positive chimes of ‘Winning Days’, ‘Sun Child’ and ‘Rainfall’, is called ‘Fuck The World’. “I do like death metal a lot too,” he chuckles.

Is this the sound of Craig Nicholls at peace with himself? “It definitely feels good that we’ve got to make a second album. I knew we had something special, but I didn’t know if we were actually going to get it out to people, if we’d even finish the first album or if people were gonna hear it. It was just driving me mad, thinking there’s albums being made every day, and I just wanted my shot at it. I’m glad we got the shot and we got enough people into it and people are still interested. It’s very nice, yeah. Flattering.”

All this and now humility. So much for reputation. But before we go, there’s one more issue that needs addressing: the McDonald’s Question. At the height of the ‘Highly Evolved’ hype, the music press hit upon a startling story. It seems that not only were Nicholls and Matthews zero-star employees of Ronald McDonald’s when they first formed the band but – get this – Nicholls is still partial to the odd burger now. In the 21st Century, sharing a taste for the most popular food in the Western World – along with a billion or so others – is somehow deemed a headline rock’n’roll story. “It’s weird,” says Nicholls. “I guess I don’t really care about it, it’s not really part of my reality except when I do interviews. We worked there a long time ago – and sometimes we eat it. (laughs) I’d like them maybe to go a tiny bit deeper: Maybe scrape the surface a little harder. If people are interested in writing about it, they can go ahead because it’s just too mad for me to wrap my head around.”

Mad Craig? Do him a favour: If anyone had bothered to look beyond the headlines, they’d have found more than a few hidden depths. An obsession with the philosophy of Bill Hicks for a start. A self-assuredness that means he doesn’t blanch at the thought of inviting a Beatle to join his band; the same kind of cockiness that comes with realising your second album is about to go stellar in a climate when not even The Strokes can guarantee a hit. The knowledge that, in a world dominated by garage band fakers and ‘Pop Idol’ creations, you alone can wail “I am for real” and know that no-one’s going to question you. Craig Nicholls is a proper rock star, even if he does just want to stay in. Who’s crazy now? ☺

Winning Days is out on March 22 on Heavenly/EMI.